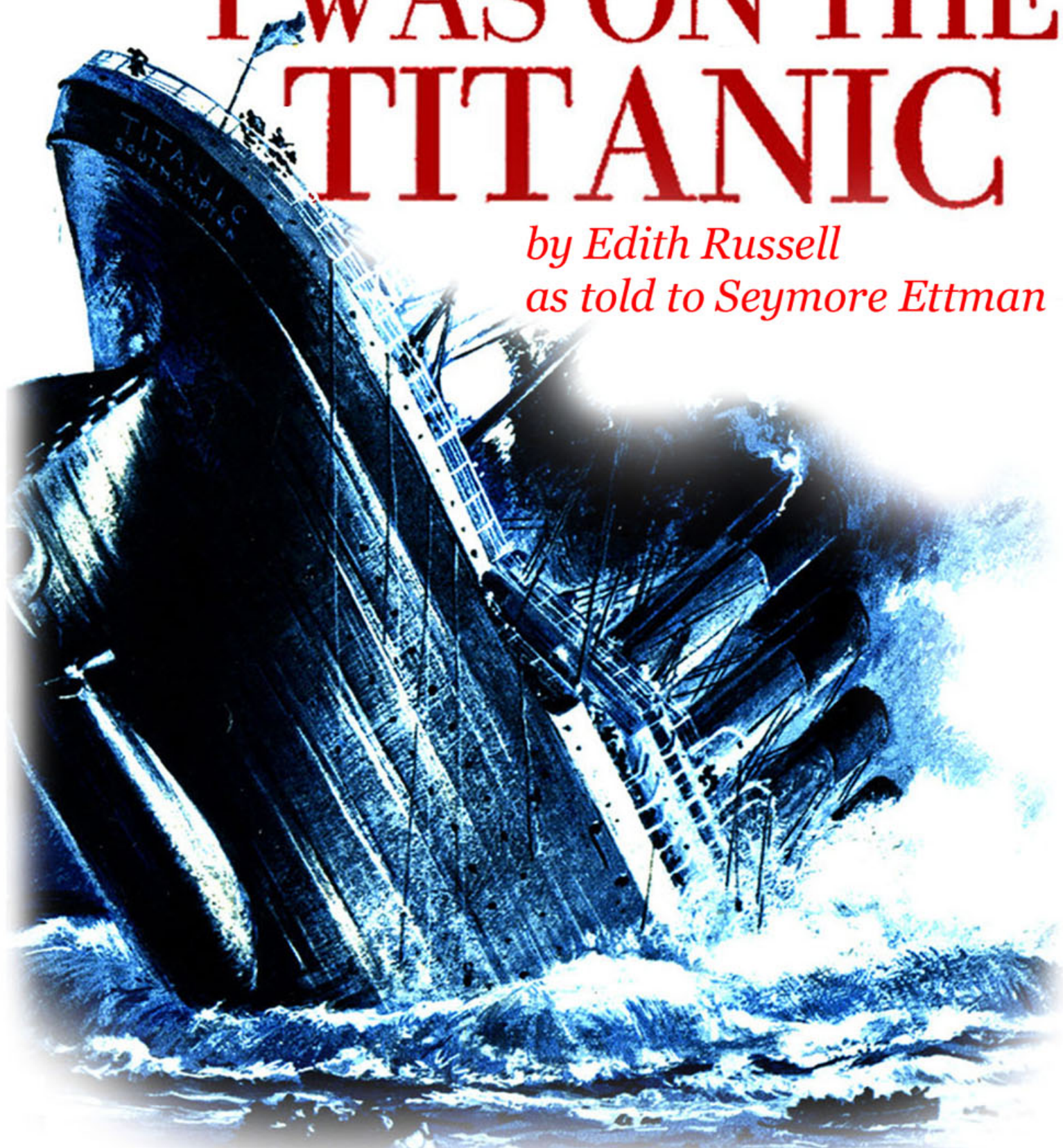


I WAS ON THE TITANIC

by Edith Russell

as told to Seymore Ettman



■ “WELL,” the young man said to me, and he was only half-joking, “it’s certainly a relief to find out after 41 years that my mother really isn’t the liar I’ve always thought her.”

The man is Frank Aks, whom I’d last seen when he was 10 months old. The story his mother, Leah, had told him, and which he’d always doubted, was how she had been pushed into one lifeboat and he had been tossed into another when the *Titanic* sank, in one of the most devastating of all maritime disasters. I remembered Mrs. Aks and her infant son clearly, so I was able to confirm her story when she, Frank, myself and nine other survivors met for a reunion in New York not long ago.

Only sheerest chance made me a passenger aboard the *Titanic* on her ill-starred maiden voyage. I had booked passage on the *George Washington* which was to sail on April 7; but I was 19 and romantic, and I wanted to spend Easter Sunday in Paris. The newspapers were full of the magnificence of the new Cunard flagship, the *Titanic*, which was leaving Cherbourg on Wednesday, the 10th. By exchanging my ticket, I gained three days in France and still hoped to reach New York on schedule.

My first sight of the *Titanic* was

I WAS ON THE TITANIC

from her steam tender which ferried us across Cherbourg Harbor. In the dusk, her decks were 11 tiers of glittering electric lights. She was less a ship than a floating city, pennants streaming from her halyards like carnival in Nice. Colonel and Mrs. John Jacob Astor were standing near me at the rail. I had made the eastern crossing with them the previous spring. The colonel pointed out some of the vital statistics of the mammoth ocean liner.

Completed in February of 1912 at the cost of \$10,000,000 the *Titanic* displaced 66,000 tons, her four smokestacks towering 175 feet above her hull. She was 833 feet long.

"She's unsinkable," Colonel Astor said, "a modern shipbuilding miracle."

Although I have made 98 Atlantic crossings, I can recall no greater provision for luxury travel than existed on the *Titanic*. There were swimming-pools, Turkish baths, gymnasiums, squash courts, cafes, winter gardens, bars and smoking-rooms. There was a lounge larger than that of the Grand Hotel, a complete hospital with operating rooms, bedrooms larger than any Paris hotel room, suites with private promenades—one of which, I understand, sold for \$4,400.

That Sunday, four days out, the day was brilliantly clear but icily cold. I stayed in my stateroom on "A" deck until 4 o'clock. Wareham, my steward, informed me that the *Titanic* was making a record run. She was expected to dock in New York by Tuesday. The sea was extraordinarily calm, and the great engines had not yet been pushed to their capacity. Anchor pools were taken up as passengers wagered on the exact time we would berth at the Cunard dock in New York.

Toward evening as I strolled along the deck I noticed the mush

I WAS ON THE TITANIC

ice on the sea and occasional floes which drifted harmlessly by. The passengers had no way of knowing that the bridge had received iceberg warnings on the wireless. There was no reason to be afraid.

There was a gala dinner that night, followed by the traditional concert in the main lounge. I was back in my stateroom by 11:20. I was just switching on the light when the first tremor shook the ship. A second, then a third—much more violent—jolted me off balance.

As I ran to the porthole to look out, the cabin floor seemed slightly tilted. I missed the rhythmic throbbing of the engines. The *Titanic* had come to a dead stop. Through the porthole I saw a ghostly wall of white. I slipped on a coat and ran out on deck.

There were no more than five passengers standing at the rail when I got there. Publisher William Stead stood frowning at the ice fragments which littered the deck. Artist Francis Millet came down the companion way from the bridge. "What do they say is the trouble?" Stead asked.

"Iceberg," Millet answered.

We all turned to the great floating mountain of white with new interest. It had drifted some distance to starboard and loomed indistinct and mysterious in the velvet dark.

"Well, I guess it's nothing serious," Mr. Stead said. "I'll go back to my cabin and read. Cheerio, all."

The rest of us made our way forward, gathering up ice chips and balling them in our hands. Someone suggested a snow fight, but it was too cold for that.

Back in my stateroom, I undressed and was about to get into bed when there was a knock at the door. A young man I had known in Cannes was standing in the doorway. "There's an order to put on lifebelts," he said. "I didn't think

I WAS ON THE TITANIC

you'd heard."

"What in the world for?"

"I haven't an idea," he said.

I closed the door, wondering why people in their right minds would choose such a ridiculous hour to hold some sort of silly boat drill. I pulled off my nightgown and slipped on a dress, over absolutely nothing. Wrapping my fur coat around me, I took one of the lifebelts and slung it over my arm. As I walked toward the lounge, Mrs. Henry Harris, wife of the theatrical producer, called to me from her stateroom.

"Do you think we shall have to leave the ship?"

"Certainly not," I said, surprised. Her question bothered me, but less than the sight of Wareham, my room steward, who came running toward me down the carpeted hall.

Wareham, usually the picture of British correctness and reserve, was clucking to himself like an agitated mother hen. "Thank God you're here, Miss," he said.

"Well, Wareham," I began, "let me tell you what I think about your ridiculous British regulations. Imagine getting people—" Something deep in Wareham's eyes stopped me. It had sounded in his voice. "What's the matter, Wareham?" I asked. "Is there really any danger?"

He helped me into my life jacket. "Danger, Miss?" he repeated. "It's a rule of the Board of Trade that even in the threat of danger life belts will be donned by the passengers. Not that I think this ship can sink. She's an unsinkable ship. Everybody knows that. But if she does go down, I'm sure we can cheat the drink for about 48 hours."

I thought about the trunkloads of advance Paris fashions I had been commissioned to bring back to New York. "If the *Titanic* sinks, will they transfer the luggage?"

Wareham finished with the last buckle. "Miss," he said solemnly,

I WAS ON THE TITANIC

"if I were you, I'd go back to your room and kiss your lovely things goodbye."

"Then you think this boat is going to sink, Wareham?"

"No one thinks anything at a time like this, Miss," he said. "We can only hope—and pray."

My mother had given me a little toy pig with a concealed music box which played the *Maxixe*. I'd come to look upon it as a mascot. I told Wareham where it was and he brought it to me in the lounge. The people around me smiled. I began to feel better when I saw that few shared Wareham's apprehensions.

The lounge filled with passengers in various stages of undress, many of them indignant at being routed out of bed after midnight. I listened to Col. Washington Roebling, the builder of the Brooklyn Bridge. "Whatever the trouble is," he said, "I doubt there's any real emergency. The *Titanic* has 15 watertight bulkheads which make her unsinkable. A leak might slow her speed a few knots, but it wouldn't do much more than that."

Just then a deck officer called an order from the lounge door. "Women and children will kindly proceed to the boat deck," he announced. "Women and children only."

There was so much confusion and indecision on the boat deck that I decided the whole thing was a farce and returned to the lounge. Sometime later, after talking with a bridge officer, I wandered outside again.

I was unprepared for the frenzy of activity which was taking place. Rows of men, both crew and passengers, were crowded against the cabin housing. Mr. Bruce Ismay, managing director of the International Mercantile Marine, wearing trousers and a white nightshirt, was shouting orders. Another passenger, Major Archibald Butt, military aide to President Taft, was

I WAS ON THE TITANIC

talking just as firmly, if a little more quietly. I was amazed to see that he was waving a revolver in his fist.

Four stokers, brandishing iron bars and shovels, burst from an open companionway. I heard a shot, and Major Butt took a step forward, his smoking gun ready in his hand.

Mr. Ismay saw me, small and frightened against the solid bank of men. "You!" he called out to me. "What the devil are you doing here? I thought all the women had left the ship!" He strode over and shoved me none too gently toward the boat deck staircase. "Get a move on!" he ordered. His voice began to boom. "If there are any other women around, for God's sake get up on the boat deck while there's still time!"

I climbed the staircase uncertainly, making my way through a narrow passage lined by sailors with linked arms. When I got to the rail, I saw a crowded lifeboat dangling 12 feet below. I stood trembling, my limbs rigid. From the swinging boat came a chorus of infants' wailing and the hysterical weeping of women. Everything was confusion.

Phillip Mock, the miniature painter, was standing near the rail. "Miss," he said gently, "if you'll just put your foot on my knee and your arm around my neck, I'll lift you to the rail, and you can jump in by yourself."

The dangling boat seemed so small and far away. "All right," I said resolutely. One of the sailors tore the toy pig from my grasp and threw it into the lifeboat. Mr. Mock held me on the rail for a terrible moment, and then I plunged down.

Phillip Mock, the miniature painter, was standing near the rail. "Miss," he said gently, "if you'll just put your foot on my knee and your arm around my neck, I'll lift you to the rail, and you can jump in by yourself."

I WAS ON THE TITANIC

The dangling boat seemed so small and far away. "All right," I said resolutely. One of the sailors tore the toy pig from my grasp and threw it into the lifeboat. Mr. Mock held me on the rail for a terrible moment, and then I plunged down.

Phillip Mock followed me into the boat seconds later. There weren't enough men to pull the oars, and he was ordered down to augment them. Then our boat, the 16th to be launched, swung slowly to the sea below. While women worked with numbed fingers to free the davit hooks, the men got the oars into the thole-pins, ready to pull away. In panic a voice shouted, "Shove her off before we get sucked under!" For a few seconds we didn't know whether we were going to make it, but the davit hooks finally swung clear and our lifeboat moved away from the ship's steep side.

I sat on what I thought was a roll of blankets, catching the butts of the starboard oars with each stroke. When I tried to shift my position, I discovered I was sitting on the dead body of a stoker, killed when he tried to jump unseen into the lifeboat. I had no choice but to remain seated on his corpse.

By 1:45, the *Titanic* slanted steeply into the sea. All of us knew she couldn't hold out much longer. At 2 A.M., the stern of the *Titanic* began to lift. She stood, finally, high against the sky, her gleaming sidelights like the windows of a skyscraper. Green rockets catapulted into the night sky, bursting and trailing eerie phosphorescent light over the macabre seascape. The *Titanic* was sending out her last futile call for help.

The fantastic column of vertical portlights slid, then shot into the sea as the *Titanic* started her blind and headlong plunge to the ocean's bottom. There were three underwater explosions as the sea hit her

I WAS ON THE TITANIC

boilers. And then a great cry, as if from one throat, went up. The men in our boat asked us to cheer, telling us, "What you hear is a cheer from the lifeboats because everybody got off safely." And do you know we actually cheered, believing that the great shout we heard was one of thanksgiving? Somehow, the immensity of the tragedy failed to filter into our minds.

For the rest of the biting cold night we rowed steadily. The women cried, and the seven babies kept up their heart-rending whimpering. It was a nightmarish ordeal of retching seasickness and unbelievable discomfort.

At daybreak, I thought I saw the red and yellow riding lights of a ship. I've always been farsighted and I'm certain that my defective vision enabled me to be the first of our party to spot the *Carpathia*, our rescue ship. We began to row determinedly and came alongside shortly before 8 o'clock. There were five empty lifeboats alongside.

They threw down lines and gunny-sack bo'sun's chairs. Only after kind and tender hands hauled us over the rail, and we were rushed to the infirmary for hot soup and emergency shock treatment, did we learn the full extent of the tragedy. Most of the men passengers and crew had gone down with the unsinkable *Titanic*.

Of the 2,500 passengers and 860 crew members who had sailed on the maiden voyage of the ill-starred floating palace, only 712 survivors had cheated the sea. ■■

PAGEANT

October, 1953 • p. 76